

CLEAR YOUR MIND TO CLEAR THE WAY: MENTAL PREPARATION



By Major Travis S. Tilman, Dr. Ken Ravizza, and Dr. Traci Statler

Engineer route clearance missions require hours of planning and preparation. Some of this preparation occurs each time a unit gets a mission and is part of the standing operating procedure or troop leading procedures. Some of the preparation is role-dependent: a .50-caliber gunner must check headspace and timing, a robot operator must check the functionality of the cameras on the robot, a squad leader must ensure that his squad has adequate water and food, and a Buffalo driver must conduct operator level preventive maintenance checks and services. Each member of a route clearance team is responsible for a different task to prepare for each mission. However, the one aspect of preparation that is easily overlooked when there are so many other tasks to complete is individual mental preparation—the ways that team members prepare themselves mentally to be in the right mind-set before leaving the base. The purpose of this article is to help Soldiers develop a mental preparation routine, integrate it into mission preparation, and consistently establish the right mind-set as they leave base to clear routes.

A Soldier may have many things on his mind before leaving the base that could prevent him from being completely focused on the mission. However, he cannot afford to wait until his team gets several kilometers down the road to set aside personal problems and be ready to

search for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Personal concerns may not be easily left behind. Route clearance missions can be very boring, and news from home can interfere with focusing on the road or the enemy. During the mission, it is important to recognize when these thoughts become distractions and to deal with them using a refocus plan. (See “Clear Your Mind to Clear the Way: Managing the Moment,” *Engineer*, January–April 2011.) Many elite athletes have learned to use a mental preparation routine to help eliminate distractions before a performance so that they can focus when they step into the arena.

The following is an example from baseball legend Hank Aaron. The interview comes from *Heads-Up Baseball*, by Ken Ravizza.

Question: You mentioned coming to the park and “focusing.” What does that mean to you?

Aaron: That means tuning out everything else. You get to the ballpark sometimes and you see three or four guys sitting around the corner playing cards, you see somebody over in the corner talking on the telephone; anything other than taking the time to focus in on what they have to do. When you get to the ballpark, you ought to be able to get yourself in tune to knowing who the pitcher is that you’re going to face. It’s kind of like taking a harness and putting it

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on a horse and letting him look nowhere but straight ahead. If you concentrate, and start thinking about what you're doing, consistently, you're going to automatically become a better hitter. That's what separates the guy that's going to hit .300 from the guy that's going to hit .270.

Question: You were amazingly consistent over an incredible number of years. To what would you attribute that?

Aaron: The same that we're talking about. I think my ability to focus was a lot different than the average guy's. A lot of guys would be distracted by different things. I was totally in tune with what I was doing. I was involved with a lot of things—I went through divorce, I went through having a child die, I went through the home run record—but as soon as I got to the ballpark, my focus would always change. A lot of people used to carry things on the field, but for some reason, once I put that uniform on, or once I walked into that clubhouse, no matter what happened at home, I could totally get focused. I could focus in on pitchers and what I had to do.

While Hank Aaron was not dealing with a combat situation, he was dealing with performing under a great deal of pressure. Besides what was stated in the conversation above, he was also dealing with being an African-American pioneer in a sport where many white fans did not want him to succeed in breaking Babe Ruth's home run record. However, he learned to mentally prepare himself for each game upon arriving at the ballpark. He did not wait until something significant happened in the game or when it was his turn to bat; he began preparing when he got to the ballpark. An effective mental preparation routine helps Soldiers get ready for action in the same way as precombat checks, standing operating procedures, preventive maintenance checks and services, and troop leading procedures. It provides a funneling effect to help eliminate distractions, establish consistency, promote focus, and increase self-confidence.

A Successful Past Mission

Just as history teaches the lessons of the past, personal experiences are helpful to improve performance. Soldiers should close their eyes, take a few deep breaths, and think back to a past training or combat mission where they were completely locked in and focused on finding IEDs. If they haven't had that experience, they should think of the best mission they've had. It might be a weapons range or some other time when they were really focused. They should think back to the way they prepared for that mission and try to answer the following questions:

- What were you thinking?
- What were you doing?
- How was your focus?

Transformation

An effective mental preparation routine is a way to transform from the normal, everyday self into a mentally focused and prepared warrior. There are many ways to do this. Some Soldiers may focus by listening to a certain type of music. Others may gain confidence and focus as they put on their uniform and personal protective gear. Think of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo—tying his laces, putting on his bandana, and firmly sheathing his knife. Watch the film *Gladiator* and note when Russell Crowe as Maximus picks up and rubs a handful of sand, signaling that he is prepared to fight. The moment of putting on body armor, a helmet, and gloves can serve as a signal of readiness—physical and mental—for the mission. Some Soldiers may clean their weapons before a mission because it helps them to prepare mentally. Some may make up their bunks to signal their transformation. There is no right or wrong answer as long as the routine is purposeful and consistent. What signifies your transformation to a focused and prepared warrior?

Start of a Mission

Hank Aaron began his mental preparation as soon as he got to the ballpark. Many elite athletes begin their mental preparation when they enter the locker room and do not end it until they are committed and ready to perform. This might be when they tie the final knot in their shoelaces, when they walk out of the locker room, or when they step onto the playing field. Routines differ for each athlete, but they consistently use their routines in practice and during competition. A Soldier's mental preparation for a mission might begin the moment he receives a warning order or the minute he wakes up before a routine mission. However, it **should not** begin just when the Soldier is leaving the base or he will not be mentally prepared.

End of a Mission

At the earliest, a mission does not end until the vehicles are back online, with fuel tanks topped off. It does not end 400 meters before the gate; the enemy is watching and waiting for Soldiers to let down their guard. Similarly, the mission does not end as Soldiers lay

in bed trying to sleep. There must be a point of transition from a mission to a resting phase or to the next mission. A good point to use is the after action review. These reviews are vital because they allow Soldiers to capture and process the lessons learned while they are risking their lives on a combat mission. A journal of personal lessons learned can serve as a transition point to end the previous mission and provide an outlet for frustrations or anger. Writing down these emotions on paper can help keep them from building up over a deployment and growing into sizeable distractions. However, a journal should also include the good things that happen. Reflecting on positive outcomes can help the writer recognize what needs to be done to get similar results in the future. Also, security concerns should be considered by anyone keeping a journal.

Personal Mental Preparation Routine

Figure 1 shows how the mental preparation routine funnels into and connects a Soldier with the mission. It is designed to eliminate distractions and allow focus on the mission. It includes events inherent in troop

leading procedures and mental preparation. The following are items that might be included when developing a routine:

Before:

- Conduct 5 or 10 minutes of controlled, slow, deep breathing to help clear your mind, focus on the present moment, and relax.
- Study maps of the route and alternate routes. Visualize traveling the roads. Identify potential IED and enemy ambush sites. Ask what other problems could occur along the routes.
- Reflect on personal missions. Why does the Soldier risk his life? Is it to ensure that medical supplies get to a small village? Is it to allow coalition forces to safely reach an objective so that they can defeat enemy forces?
- Choose a focal point or something very small that requires genuine concentration to see. The focal point is helpful in pulling the mind to the present moment and can help in refocusing amidst chaos.

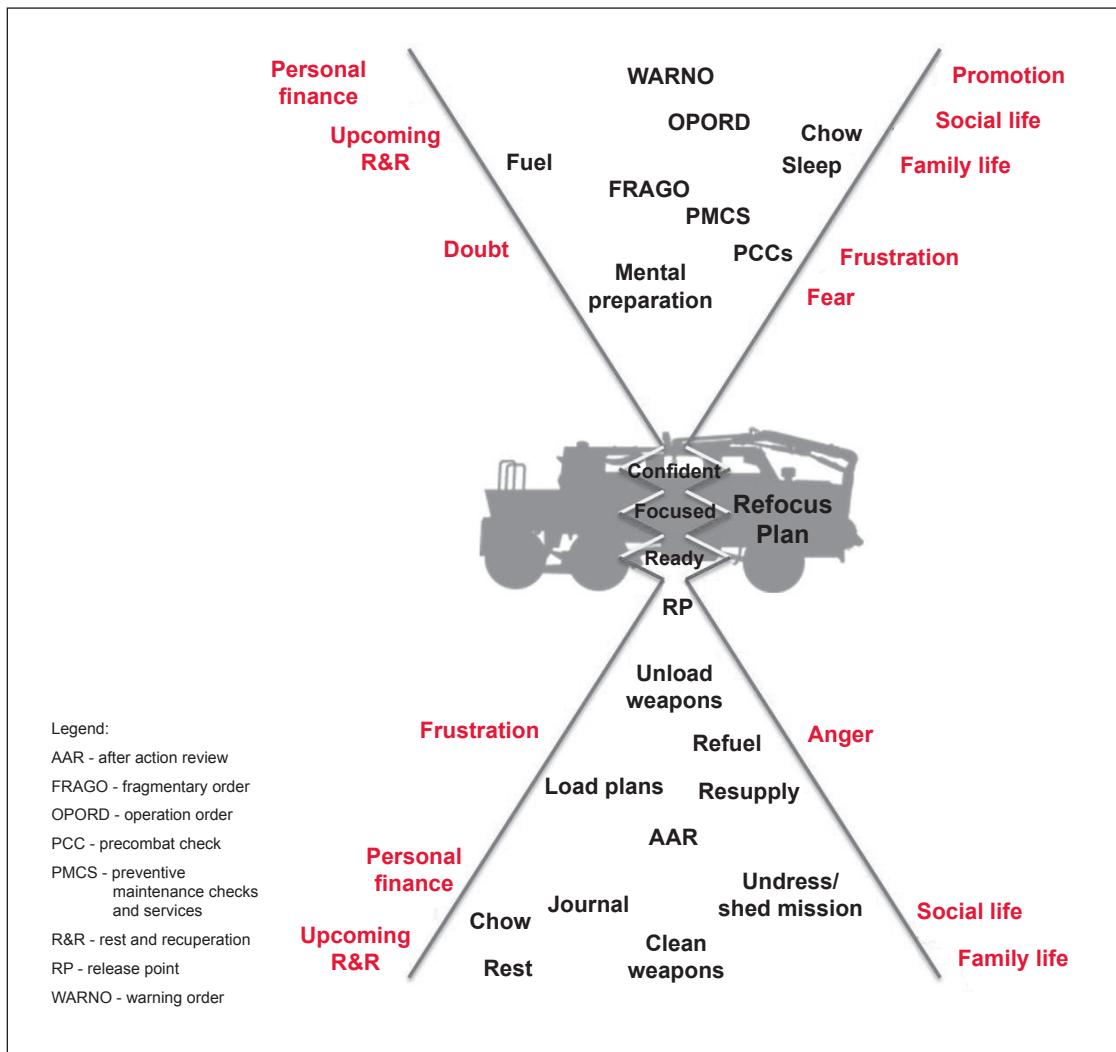


Figure 1

After:

- Prepare an after action review to capture the lessons learned so that there can be future improvement.
- Write in a journal to help mentally “let go” of the mission. Writing is a powerful tool to release strong emotions.
- Fully take off the uniform and “shed” the mission at the same time. A mission should not be carried to bedtime or to the next mission.

Use Figure 2 to develop a personal mental preparation routine. Write specific actions to take to mentally prepare. Having created a routine, learn it, know it, and use it. Use it during training and before rehearsals. Adjust it and refine it to meet the realities of the current situation. It may be desirable to have one mental preparation routine for missions with advanced warning and another, shorter routine for short-notice missions.

A mental preparation routine does not guarantee success, but it allows Soldiers to occupy the right mind-set and achieve success more often. Create a routine, practice it, and adjust it as needed. Soon it will become an integral part of mission preparation and allow you to be focused and confident as you leave the base. Even if the mental

preparation routine allows you to find just one more IED per month, it will be worth it.

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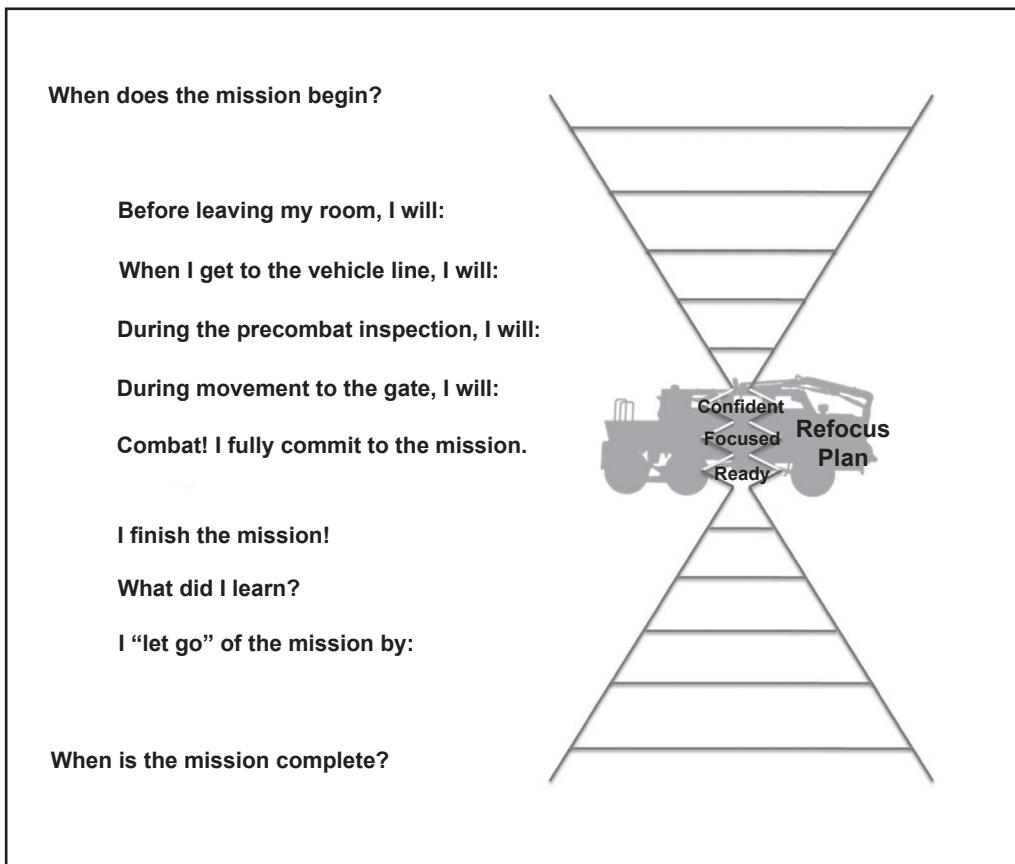


Figure 2